

Saint Peter Damian

SAINT OF THE DAY

21_02_2020

The life of this great monk, theologian and bishop, a protagonist of the 11th century who significantly contributed to the renewal of the Church, enjoying the trust of the various popes who employed him as a collaborator, did not have an easy beginning. Saint Peter Damian (1007-1072), the last of six children and a native of Ravenna, soon lost both parents and lived his childhood in hardship. The role of his elder brother Damian was crucial to his upbringing (in his honour, Peter was called Damiani, that is, "of Damian"). Damian was an archpriest who took care of his upkeep and education, sending him to study in Faenza. Peter moved to Parma afterwards, where he learnt the liberal arts, and in 1032 returned to his hometown, where he worked for approximately three years, distinguishing himself as an excellent teacher.

Peter Damian would later be recognised as one of the greatest Latin scholars of his time, as well as a versatile writer, even though throughout his life he showed no regard for fame, preferring the contemplation of God. Even as a teacher he was devoted to fasting, mortification, prayer and works of charity. After meeting two monks, at about 28 years of age, he entered the Camaldolese monastery of Fonte Avellana (which Dante would mention in the Divine Comedy), founded a few decades earlier by Saint Romuald, whose hagiography Peter Damian would later write. In 1043 his confrères elected him prior of the monastery. The Saint drafted a Rule stressing the importance of the "rigour of the hermitage" and defining the monastic cell as the "parlour where God converses with men". In this relationship with the divine, the silence of the cloister plays an essential role, together with the love for the cross which must animate every Christian: "He does not love Christ, who does not love the cross of Christ".

Peter founded and reorganised several monasteries. He strongly denounced the moral degradation of the clergy

, severely warning the priests who infringed celibacy (at the time, especially in Lombardy, the so-called Nicholaism was widespread) and practiced simony, which then meant above all the buying and selling of ecclesiastical offices. It was at this time that he wrote the Liber Gomorrhianus (or Book of Gomorrah) on sins related to sexual morality, among which he firmly condemned sodomy, without overlooking the call to conversion for the good of the soul: "If indeed the devil it is powerful enough to make you sink into this vice, Christ is much more powerful and can take you back to the peak from which you fell".

All these practices contrary to virtues were also fought against by another great contemporary man of the Church, Hildebrand of Sovana, the future Saint Gregory VII, from whom the "Gregorian Reform" takes its name. He is known for his role in the Investiture Controversy, which opposed him to the emperor, who claimed the power to appoint bishops.

Aware of the need for a renewal of the Church, when Stephen IX appointed him Cardinal-Bishop of Ostia, Peter Damian accepted this office out of obedience, although his soul preferred the monastic life. From that moment (it was 1057-1058), he worked for years in close contact with the popes, who entrusted him with numerous missions. From Alexander II, he obtained permission to return to the monastery in 1067, but two years later he did not refuse another mission, that is, to prevent the emperor Henry IV from divorcing Bertha of Savoy. He defined himself "the least servant of the monks". In his theological doctrine, which earned him the title of Doctor of the Church in 1828, he exalted the importance of sancta simplicitas, that is, the holy simplicity of those who, rather than succumbing to the idolatry of knowledge as an end in itself, concentrate on seeking and contemplating God by feeding on prayer.